

May 4, 1994

Dear David,

Thank you for sending a copy of Against the Apocalypse. I look forward to reading it, though I find that I need to give myself a break from the Holocaust and great human sufferings in general for a time. I am blessed with the luxury of forgetting.

I have a hunch that you would be interested to know more about how I came across "Night Words," and about the process that led to its performance. I would also like to explain some of my thinking in creating a stage adaptation of the piece, and hope nothing on the tape makes you cringe. The quality of the tape is excellent for an archival record, but of course video can't take the place of being there. In all modesty, it was a much stronger performance than the videotape allows.

I first encountered "Night Words" as a graduate student in the History Department at the University of California, Santa Barbara, in 1988. The Hillel rabbi, Steven Cohen, had begun a tradition of organizing a reading each Yom HaShoah. I participated in the scripted performance in 1988 and 1989, and, given my interest in and love for theater, began nurturing the idea of a stage performance.

I kept my photocopies of the script through several years and changes of residence, but until recently, I had neither the means nor the resources to produce the work for the stage. I still don't have the means, but at least I found the resources. My present work (I am Assistant Director of the Utah Arts Festival) allowed me time in the evenings and some of the administrative necessities (like a laser printer and postage meter) I needed, and before I knew what was happening, I had received the go-ahead last fall from the University of Utah to produce and direct "Night Words" as part of the Days of Remembrance, which they observe annually during the week prior to Yom HaShoah. Westminster College, a small private college in town, offered to donate the use of a new and beautiful theater. I applied for and received grants from the Utah Humanities Council, the Salt Lake City Arts Council, and the United Jewish Federation. These covered most of the expenses (my cash budget was about \$2700, with a little more than that in donated goods and services).

What struck me about "Night Words" from my first reading was the brilliant and effective juxtaposition of Biblical or Talmudic passages with eyewitness accounts, and the midrashic effect of using passages from so many sources as commentary on the Holocaust. It was something I had never encountered before in Holocaust literature or art. "Night Words" is not an exposition, an explanation, or an indictment. "Night Words" is simply an acknowledgement. A phrase from a Whitman poem comes to mind: "This is the profound lesson of reception / Neither preference nor denial." "Night Words" allows us to have one or several reactions to the Holocaust, within the ritual drama of a commemorative service.

I also recognized that these juxtapositions could have very strong visual components. While a man is being interviewed about the platform inside the entrance gate, for example, a young woman, like a memory image, hovers above

and behind, reading from the Torah out of a cool, misty blue light (which unfortunately doesn't show up so well on the tape). Other segments of the piece also translated effectively to the visual: the us-versus-them of "THE LORD YOUR GOD HE IS GOD OF GODS..."; the Chelmnitsky cantillation with an army/choir in the background; or my somewhat liberal interpretation of Halitsah.

I hope my editing has not upset any of your most cherished intentions. There was simply too much there for a ninety-minute performance. I was very sorry to exclude some passages I particularly liked. I also found the necessity to change the order of some of the songs and sequences for dramatic viability. The only really significant change in the text was the inclusion of a few passages from Frankl's book, which is for me the most moving account I have read. I wanted to make the scene in the "camp" ((Dance! Sing! Salute!) a sort of climax, and wanted to strengthen the presentation of hope, love, and the refusal to surrender. Thus, while a dear one is beaten, a woman's response is prayer. The victim insists on maintaining his freedom to react to his suffering with dignity. And finally the dry bones rise again.

I obtained the slides from YIVO, from the Martyrs Memorial in Los Angeles, and from some books I shall not name for fear of copyright infringement penalties. They don't show up so well on tape, but I can tell you about them. The first series, during the musical prelude, are artworks: Leskley, Fritta, anonymous children. During and after the arm-numbering, I showed a series of what might be called "classic" Holocaust photos: crowded ghettos in squalor, people boarding trains, rabbis being mocked and beaten, crematoria, mass graves, bodies, bodies, bodies. During Zeitlin's "A kholem fun Maydanek" (which I recorded myself in a studio and played back during the performance, since I couldn't find anyone who could really read Yiddish), I showed a number of very poignant photos of children, including the classic "Sarah" by Vishniac. Finally, the very last slide was for me was the complete visual metaphor for what I wanted to say with the performance. It achieved an impactful and unexpected dramatic effect. It is a photo of two women, one of whom wears the star on her back, exchanging a kiss through a chain link fence. I projected the slide after the actors had taken their bows and left the stage, but just before the house lights came up. The applause died immediately. Apparently the audience expected that the performance was continuing. A kiss through a chain link fence. Past and present. Persistence. Determination. Refusal to surrender. The triumphant power of love. As they looked at the photo, the house lights came up, and they realized the performance was finished and rose to leave only hesitantly. I was pleased with the final moment of poignant uncertainty.

✓ Which brings me to another aspect of "Night Words" which I think made it particularly suited to a stage performance. It is always risky to "violate the fourth wall" in a theater work and involve the audience directly, which can instantaneously destroy any success the piece might enjoy. In "Night Words," however, people recognized the significance of being involved and participatory, even in uncomfortable ways, like taking off their shoes, or standing for seven minutes. One audience member told me she had forgotten the number on her arm until she was getting ready for bed, and discovering it there made her cry all over again. I was pleased with the unanimously positive response to these portions of the piece. We are not simply spectators to the Holocaust, nor to any human tragedes. George Steiner said,

"We are accomplices to that which leaves us indifferent." The experience of physical discomfort (standing for a long time) or psychological discomfort (having an actor write on your arm or tell you to remove your shoes) successfully communicated to the audience a symbol of the physical and psychological distress endured by the victims.

You sounded surprised that I paid the actors: I endeavored in every way to stage as professional performance as possible, including stipends, publicity, the "look" of the show, and so forth. Of course, the actors were marvelous, and the cantor as well. (His name is Laurence Loeb, and I understand he was at JTS for a number of years, though I'm not sure when. He is the cantor at Congregation Kol Ami here in Salt Lake. One representative of a sponsoring organization recounted to me that his rendition of the Chelmnitsky piece nearly caused her to lose consciousness in the theater.) We also had a very sensitive and creative lighting designer (who pointed out that each of the actors represented a million akedahs), a stage manager who kept everything in its proper place, and a number of technical personnel.

I hope I haven't carried on at too much length. It's terribly frustrating to have invested so much thought and effort into something and have no one to listen to an account of the details. Thank you for indulging me. I enjoyed this work with "Night Words" immensely. It has enriched my life and my thought and my appreciation for the six million. I wish you all the best and continued success in all your endeavors, and look forward to speaking with you again. If you encounter a generous patron, perhaps we can bring the show to the East Coast.

With fond regards,

Jeffrey Berke

